

### Edited Interview with Johnny Opperman in Blainroe (28/4/2004)

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (MM) Johnny Opperman (JO)

1. **MM:** So what year were you born Johnny?
2. **JO:** I was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1917. So I'm 87 years of age at the moment.
3. **MM:** And you're looking well for it!
4. **JO:** My parents, my father was Swiss and he came over here, I think it was in 1912, 1911 or '12 on a trip. He was at the time, he had gone to England, to Buxton, from Switzerland as his first trip outside Switzerland having completed his apprenticeship, and the time of King Edward's visit here to Ireland there was some sort of an excursion and I don't know why he ever thought of it but he went on this excursion to Dublin and he met my mother and then there was a subsequent visit after that and after that then he must have proposed and I suppose he had all sort of problems then because he had to change his religion to become a Catholic and that took some time. Anyway.....



Figure JO.1: Karl Opperman c. 1904

5. **MM:** Where was your mother from?
6. **JO:** Dublin, oh yeah. Her father was a master baker.
7. **MM:** What was her maiden name?

8. **JO:** O'Farrell and then they got married then in 1912 I think or 1914, no 1912 that's right. 1912 or 1913 and they settled down and they opened a shop, a pastry shop in Camden Street, right beside there was a cinema there called the Deluxe Cinema and they opened this restaurant and at the back of the restaurant was a dance hall but this was a little different to the modern dance halls and they were doing very well. Then when the war broke out my father went back to do his, he was called and as a true Swiss he went back to Switzerland to do his military duty and when he went back then he was away for a while, I think six months or maybe less. Anyway the people thought he was a German and I needn't tell you his place way boycotted. Mother was trying to keep the shop going and it went broke, they had to get rid of it. So then he started here in Dublin and I think the first place he was into was Jammet's, after Jammet's then he went.....
9. **MM:** He was a chef by trade or a *patissier*?
10. **JO:** Oh yes he was a *patisserie* to start with but he had also some training in cuisine. So there was no such a thing as that time as a separate *patisserie* you know so he had to make up his mind that right if he wanted to get on he also had to be a chef as well, a kitchen chef and he went into Jammet's.
11. **MM:** Did he stay long there?
12. **JO:** I don't know how long he stayed there but he went into Jammet's, he spent some time there and then he went into Jury's in the Green, not the Green.....Dame Street and then he after the Gresham Hotel was burnt during the....1922.....But after that then.....He reopened that and he was there until, Ms Mullins was the manageress at the time and he was there until about 1940 I think. It would have been about that I think and then Toddy O'Sullivan took over.
13. **MM:** So Karl Uhlemann would have succeeded him?
14. **JO:** Now he was with O'Sullivan for a while but then O'Sullivan wanted his own people so he let the father go and then brought in Uhlemann at the same time and it was very awkward because at that particular time I knew Uhlemann very well, well sort of a father (figure) but I knew him more because he was an artist and when I was training one of the places I went to was the Regal Rooms Restaurant and he was the chef there and I used to go to the museums with him, to the art galleries. He was a fine man. Anyway the father left then, so in the meantime I had started my apprenticeship in the Shelbourne Hotel and I was under the, everywhere in the Shelbourne at that time was a real, I mean there was a *gardemanger*, there was a *poissonier*, there was a *pâtissier* and there was the *saucier* who was the next, the head chef and then there was the veg chef and the *rotisier*.
15. **MM:** So the full partie system?
16. **JO:** There was the full thing and there was hardly any English spoken in that place at that time.
17. **MM:** Can I take you back a second. Where did you go to school? Where were you living in Dublin?
18. **JO:** Oh sorry. When we were first married we were living with my grandmother in Synge Street.
19. **MM:** That's where you grew up?
20. **JO:** That's where I was born. Then we left there and we went Homeville in Rathmines and we were there for many years and in the meantime I went to college, the Newbridge College, no I first went to the Christian Brothers in Singe Street.

21. **MM:** That would have been your primary education?
22. **JO:** That's right yeah. Then I went to Newbridge (college), and I was in Newbridge for five years 1927 till 1932 and then I started my apprenticeship. I wanted nothing else but to follow in my father's footsteps.



**Figure JO.2: Newbridge College Pre-Junior Cup Team 1929-1930**

23. **MM:** And you would have been a bit of an exception coming from Newbridge College to the Shelbourne kitchen?
24. **JO:** I hadn't thought of that, that's right and.....
25. **MM:** Like Newbridge College was fairly well to do. It was one of the top schools. You had sort of the Blackrock College, you had the Newbridge, you had the Belvedere, you had the Clongows and a few others yeah?
26. **JO:** And I then started, at first I was going to become a priest, the usual jazz, you know, but I knew all along I wanted to go into the business, the catering business because I was interested in nothing else but, that even at home, you know, and I started my apprenticeship in the Shelbourne Hotel and I think that was the year of the Eucharistic Congress.
27. **MM:** 1932 isn't it?
28. **JO:** And we were in Homeville in Rathmines and I remember at that time, you know, the dining room in the Shelbourne used to be cleared out for the night time, and these cubicles put in and beds to house the people.....for the Congress. There was that many people from France and many is the night I walked home, no bus or anything else, that time they didn't think of sending you home by taxi. (Laugh) And I served my complete apprenticeship in the Shelbourne.
29. **MM:** Who was the chef there at the time?
30. **JO:** The chef at the time was a man called Otto Wuest. He later became the catering manager of Lewis's in Birmingham.

31. **MM:** Lewis's, and where was he from?
32. **JO:** Swiss. At that time there was only my father – one, Guigax – two, Baumann – three, and Wuest – four, Hess – five. There was only five Swiss in Dublin at that time.
33. **MM:** But they held senior positions?
34. **JO:** Well they were all head chefs except Hess who was the manager of the Red Bank at that time. Guigax was the head chef in the Savoy. Baumann was the head chef in the Red Bank Restaurant, and Wuest was the head chef of the Shelbourne.
35. **MM:** And then your father was head chef in the Gresham?
36. **JO:** Hess was one of the first few who had a car in Dublin at that time (laugh). So you could imagine.
37. **MM:** Sorry what was your father's first name?
38. **JO:** Charles. Carl in fact, but Charles they used to call it here.
39. **MM:** What was the food like and who was working there in the Shelbourne at the time?
40. **JO:** The Shelbourne, all the chefs were Swiss except one, the roast cook was a fellow by the name of Reilly and he was a little fellow. A wonderful character and the, I forget the name now, there was a woman, I forget her name now and she was the veg chef. The head chef was Otto Wuest and the second chef was Charles Muller.
41. **MM:** Now Jury, Captain Jury in charge here?
42. **JO:** He was the head man and the boss at that time, the Managing Director, no the General Manager was a man by the name of William Powell. Now the Shelbourne, at that time, apart from the kitchen being absolutely the best and whole set-up, each department on its own. It also had its own linen room and the head *pâtissier* at that time was a man by the name of Waldmeyer. Fritz Waldmeyer yeah and Fritz Waldmeyer married the head seamstress in the Shelbourne, the one that took care of the all the linen and she was the one when it would come in, she would examine it and they'd have little girls working there sewing and everything else, a complete unit. Now on top of that you went out and they had, first of all you had the big washer where all the china and everything was washed up. Another separate entity and beside that then they had what they called the silver room where at that time all the silver was hand polished and all the big dishes and the covers, God there was stuff there that was absolutely magnificent, and even in the kitchen we used nothing else but copper pots.
43. And there used to be a man, he's dead and gone now I'm sure by the name of Collie. He was the one who used to tin all the pots when they needed tinning, you know, and here's an interesting one. The present manager of the Four Seasons, the Assistant Manager at that time was his father, I think it was Tom Brennan, I forget now. But a great character, I knew very, very well. A fine big man he was, and he was the assistant manager of the Shelbourne Hotel that time. Now next to the silver room where all the silver was polished and all the cutlery was taken care of as well and there was a head man there in charge of that as well, and they had their own special uniform at that time. Then you came to what you call the still room, where all the toasts were made, the breads was housed and the tea and coffees and anything like that, that was taken care of, that was a separate unit altogether but again all working as a unit. Right opposite that then was the dispense bar. There was no public bar at that time in the Shelbourne. Oh no you'd put your nose up a thing like that and that was run by a fellow by the name Bill Daly and at that time my understanding was that the lounge waiter he paid for his job.



44. **MM:** He would make his money in the tips?
45. **JO:** His money in the tips but you didn't bring such a thing as a..... If you ordered a gin and tonic he would put the tonic into the (inaudible) and leave the bottle there. He made his money by putting money in the other. But when I say, I understand he gets to pay for his job but the devil wouldn't want a float on the plate and at that time the Hospital Trust started up and they invited newspaper people from all over the world and they used to stay in the Shelbourne and no matter what they ordered they got and it was paid for by the Hospital Trust.... and it was nothing to see staff going round smoking cigars that size (indicating large cigars). It was unbelievable the amount of money that was spent at that time by the Hospital Trust. Anyway I left there and went to the The Regal Rooms and the head chef at that time was Karl Uhlemann.
46. **MM:** Now the Regal Rooms was down next to the Theatre Royal wasn't it?
47. **JO:** Correct, and they tried to start off with having a fancy restaurant, you know, but like a fast food fancy restaurant, but it was alright for a while, but like all fast food efforts it ran its course, and the manager at that time was a son of, oh God he used own the Dolphin Hotel. Jack (**note:** Nugent), I can't think of his name anyway. He wasn't his son, he was a relation of his, because the son was a different man. I left there then.....
48. **MM:** Sorry while you were in the Regal Rooms, was McManus in the Regal Rooms the same time?
49. **JO:** Yes.
50. **MM:** And how was he, while he was in the Regal Rooms?
51. **JO:** I want to tell you something. What's his name, Uhlemann, he was very thin skinned, you know at times, and he used to plod around you see and himself and McManus always had words but McManus had words at will, he was the best character. One day Uhlemann walked into the toilet and he came out half pulling up the trousers and he says 'there's no toilet paper inside' and McManus shouted back 'there's plenty of sand paper in the equipment room', you see, and Uhlemann went back into the toilet and the dirty bastard and he was out like a shot, holding his trousers in one and getting pots and firing them at McManus and the language and you think..... I can picture that still. Anyway.....
52. **MM:** The food in the Regal Rooms, when you say fast food like, do you mean *entrées* quick? Was it still silver service or was it plate service?
53. **JO:** There was a certain amount of silver service, there was. It was targeted at the theatre and it was the first effort I think they had of trying to do a restaurant, shall I say, that would suit certain pockets.
54. **MM:** More the middle classes as such.
55. **JO:** But it went so far they had to..... It didn't close down but I believe afterwards they had to more or less make it.....
56. **MM:** Change it or whatever?
57. **JO:** Not silver service, no, and at the time..... McManus was a character and he got involved with two women. Do you know the story?
58. **MM:** I heard something about it all right.

59. **JO:** So he got that involved he didn't know what to do and at that particular period he was (inaudible) at the Gresham and I forget his name and he married the two women within two days and of course he was up for bigamy and he got a year in prison for it but fair dues when he came out he went back in there. He was probably a year doing some minor job but other..... He was a bloody good worker and he had a sense of humour.
60. **MM:** And did he hold on to one of the wives or did he loose both.
61. **JO:** I think he lost both. (laugh) Anyway that was that episode. I left there then and my friend Whist got in touch with me, he was opening the Cellar, oh no not Whist. My father was in the Gresham. He tried to do something about the pastry work and he had a pastry chef in from Switzerland. The brother of the man that taught me in the Shelbourne, Waldemeyer and he was tall and stately and everything else. He could just not stand a place like this.
62. **MM:** Poorly equipped?
63. **JO:** And he stayed there for a while and then maybe he stayed there for a year-and-a-half or so maybe two and then he went to the Norbury House Hotel in (Droitwich) England and when he went there he got me in there as an apprentice as well but this was a different place. This place was somewhat like the Shelbourne in the old days. There were (inaudible) everywhere and the quality of the cooking was unbelievable. We even had different kitchens for visiting dignitaries of different countries like we used to get a lot of these Sultans and all these. They brought their own kitchen people with them and we had special kitchens for them. They made their own curries and all that type of thing. It was a wonderful place.
64. **MM:** Was there English chefs working there or were they continental or were they mixed?
65. **JO:** There was a lot of continental people there.
66. **MM:** But a good few English as well?
67. **JO:** Oh yeah. But you see England even at that time wasn't great and you know the odd place like the people who used to stay were the rock stars and all these people and at that time an aeroplane, there was no, but at that time a plane used to leave (France) every day, land in Croydon and then was sent down by special train to Droitwich with all the fresh vegetables and fruits from the south of France and that happened every day. All the food used to be sent in by train from London, the only thing they used to buy locally was the eggs, milk and cream you know. But the hotel.....
68. **MM:** This is still before the war, this is around 1938 or so?
69. **JO:** I was there the night the war broke out and I mean the place was owned by the Times newspaper at that time.
70. **MM:** Wow.
71. **JO:** But that place used to be fantastic. The only reason they built the hotel where it was built was because they used the Brine Baths and the Brine Baths at that time, people would come in for a bath two weeks. I'd see people coming in and their legs and arms and that intertwined and after about seven or eight days they'd be up dancing on a Saturday night because they used to put them in the Brine Baths, they used to serve them afternoon tea or whatever they wanted and everything would float. They wouldn't sink. Only very, very wealthy people and we had a, I'll never forget it, we had a head waiter at that time who was a bloody genius. A fellow by the name of Kemo, an Italian and he could, I never saw him making any notes but he would remember everything that everybody wanted and you know like when he came into the, he would never dream of walking in the kitchen itself but outside when he came in everybody would take bloody of what he was going

to be because he in himself was a man to be respected because he had everything at his fingertips. He was fabulous. But that's the type of workers that were there.

72. I was there until the night the war broke out and we'd all gone out with all the lads, we all drunk, I can picture it this minute. They all had to be in the barracks. They were all called up and they had to be in the barracks by midnight and we left them all in and they were trying to pull me in as the well. The guard no, you haven't got, out you go. The following day I went back home and I was in a train from Hollyhead, no from Droitwich to Hollyhead and I was right at a window in the corridor of the train. Literally banged up like that there was that many people in the carriage and that's how I came home. I was home two or three months at the time doing odd jobs around and then I got my call up papers for Swiss army because when I was born I was registered in Switzerland by my grandfather and I had (inaudible) when I could afford it. Military tax because I didn't do military duty. Anyway when the war started or when I got my call up much to the dismay of my parents I said I want to go and do my military duty because I thought I was going to learn a couple of languages and at the same time probably get to know more about my home base and I got as far, I got my ticket, my travel papers the lot but France capitulated in the meantime so I was turned back, I couldn't get through so that ended that episode. My next place after that was to the, you know I can't name the place.
73. **MM:** Was it Northern Ireland was it?
74. **JO:** Yeah, I'll think of it now in the minute. Not Derry. Derry yeah what am I talking about. I answered an advertisement and I got a job there as chef in the City Hotel.
75. **MM:** Where would the advertisement have been? Would it have been in the newspaper?
76. **JO:** In the newspaper, it must have been. And I went up North and interesting enough I had no passport or anything else at the time only my military passport from the Swiss. I went up alright by train naturally, and went to the hotel, but then when I went to get my ration book and all this type of thing I had to put in my passport. Jesus at 3am the following morning the police (arrived). 'Come down to the police station'.
77. **MM:** Thought you were a spy?
78. **JO:** Anyway I had to give names in Dublin and everything else, and that was sorted out, and I spent a good part of the war years there, and I went from there then and I took over the stewardship; I was called the steward at that time of the base in Derry for the American army and navy. I was only a little fellow and ran the whole thing. I was catering for over 30,000 at that time in different sections and we had, the amount of stuff that came in was unbelievable, unbelievable. We even brought our own vegetables and everything else.
79. **MM:** Where was the food coming from?
80. **JO:** America. And even to come to think of it people had lost their lives bringing stuff over, cabbages and turnips and carrots. One time they sent over five tonne of butter, in ordinary wrappers with oranges and lemons and all that type of thing. But sure the butter was all tainted. And we had to sell it to candle makers and subsequent to that all the butter came in tins. Come to think of it, we used to take in barrels of corn beef, Jesus it must have been corned for years. That was the only thing, the meat, the bacon, the hams and to see this thing and that thing you know when.....
81. **MM:** When there was such shortage everywhere else. Was there much of the black market going on, since there was so much of this available?
82. **JO:** The black market was more by the, what you call it, the Americans than anybody. My God they would. The foods they used to get. They used to have their own containers, clear the

table and put all the tinned fruit. They were dining and wining now, like they'd never dreamed in their life to be, you know. And anyway, that went on till the end of the war years.

83. **MM:** How about just before that, you were in the hotel in Derry. Was there a problem getting rations for the hotel in Derry?
84. **JO:** Yes. I'd forgotten, this is an interesting one. All the women used to come over from Burtonport, which is in Donegal. And it was amusing to see they'd come in little thin women, Jesus they'd be that size you know and they'd be nothing to get ten or twenty dozen eggs from them. Their coats were made with little pockets in them for the eggs. It was unbelievable how much stuff they carried and everybody knew. Now and again they'd stop them but they had it well organised because people on the border, they got their own.
85. I left there and then I took over the Glen of Antrim Hotel as manager and here again like getting foodstuff we had what you'd call the food inspectors and again the Glen of Antrim Hotel was practically out at the sea but at the back it was hilly you know and it was all woodland and once the, we had a name for it, once the bush telegraph started from as far away as up on the coast.....
86. **MM:** Is this on the northern side or the Donegal side or the other side?
87. **JO:** It would be up near, I'll think of it now in the minute. It would start there..... It was a wonderful place for lamb and you'd be carrying whole sides of bloody lamb and hanging them up with cloths and sheets and all sorts of things. Tied and hanging them up in the trees until they went and at that time we had some of the Directors of the hotel, they were suppliers in Dublin in Belfast of pork and bacon and all that type of thing. We were never short of anything. The only trouble was when you got the meat you had to take everything and.....
88. **MM:** Hide the stuff?
89. **JO:** And it was all right now for a while because they'd come and they'd do that for a while and that would be it. In the summer time, in the winter time the problems then was with all the fishermen and the fishermen at that time in the winter they wouldn't be any money flowing you see and they'd nothing to spend on drinks so a lot of them used to be drinking them mentholated spirits and when they'd look to use the toilet the bloody smell was unbelievable and when you'd get that smell you were supposed to call the local police cause it used to set them bloody mad. I didn't tell, you very, very seldom I did because you'd take your bloody life in your hands you know (laugh). That was down there with the mountains you'd be lost for the rest of your life.
90. **MM:** In the summer now there was plenty of fish coming in.
91. **JO:** Plenty of fish, beautiful stuff. All sorts of fish, real good, never short of it you know. You didn't eat a lot of meat at that time because I mean you didn't use a lot of beef at that time because (a) there was no necessity, the lamb down there was absolutely magnificent and then you'd all the fish you wanted.
92. **MM:** Yeah, was salmon still a rich mans fish back then?
93. **JO:** Yeah it was, yeah, but then the salmon used to come in, Christ, the bloody thing was still alive when it came in. You know bloody big salmon and they'd to come up to the store and they'd have the whole thing there, you'd select what you wanted. Everyday! that was everyday.
94. **MM:** What other type of fish, what was the most common type of fish?
95. **JO:** Well you got everything. I mean when you come think of it you got cod, you got turbot at times, that type of thing you know. Good quality fish, and plaice, all the prawns you wanted, and of course there a lot of lobster because there was a very jagged coast you know.



96. **MM:** Oysters?
97. **JO:** Oysters, not a lot of oysters no. Ah, oysters at that time, wasn't that popular. Oysters only became really the same as prawns, only in latter years really, come to think of it, did prawns and oysters and all become really popular? That was a wonderful, I really enjoyed the excitement was there as well everything else you know.
98. **MM:** Who stayed in the hotels at that stage?
99. **JO:** Oh God we got a lot of people from southern Ireland there. Do you see, there's no where else to go ...
100. **MM:** Yeah because they couldn't travel because of the petrol ration and all that sort of stuff?
101. **JO:** Or you had that or else; they went from that to England or Scotland and we'd get the Scottish people over into, because that mainland at one time was united. I mean you could see on a clear day you could see the Mull of Kintyre.
102. **MM:** Yeah, yeah.
103. **JO:** I mean there no such thing as Americans.
104. **MM:** I was going to say they were so well fed in their own base anyway. They'd no need to come (laugh). How did you end up getting a job in the base? Because you were in the City Hotel first, then you went to the Glens of Antrim Hotel and you ended up in the Base.
105. **J** Oh that was a very interesting one. Well now, all the high blokes from the Base used to be in the hotel dining and Jesus I'm trying to think of his name now, most of these men were all big business men in the States who had joined this thing called William Fuller and Company. And they had all very big salaries and these were I forget what they were called but anyway they were hoteliers, construction men, you know. And the one man in charge of all this was a man Jesus I forget his name, anyway and he had the hotels in California and he was in charge of the catering and one day he came to me and said to me would I be interested in coming to work for them. And naturally I asked him one or two questions, anyway I left and in I went to the American company and I became then after six months your man, he was called the Chief Stewart and after six months little did I know but he was going back to California and I was given his job.
106. **Jesus** when I come to think of it. I was there until the end of the war but during the time I was there your man had written to me a couple of times wanting me to go to California to look after one of his hotels, Jesus I needn't tell you when I went and told them at home. The mother, 'now son, no bloody way!' Anyway I have nothing to complain about. I stayed there until the end of the war and then I was offered, at the end of the war I was offered a job in the Railway Restaurant in the Great Northern Restaurant in Belfast. It was a top quality restaurant and I went there as chef and spent maybe a year or fifteen months there. I stayed there actually until the end of the war with Japan because the night I see, Jesus I'll never forget it, it was one of the roughest nights I was ever in my life. It was the night the amnesty was signed with Japan. I was there for, I forget I was there for about a year-and-a-half.
107. **MM:** When you say it was one of the roughest nights, do you mean because it was so busy because everybody was celebrating.
108. **JO:** No, no.
109. **MM:** You were celebrating yourself was it.

- 110.**JO:** Afterwards, yeah. I left there and in the meantime again I had looked at an ad in the paper and the ad in the paper was to open the, to take over the International Hotel in Bray and it was to be reopened after the army had been in their for nearly twenty years so can imagine the state of the bloody place. And the people that owned it at the time Corscadden. I went there and they hadn't a clue about restaurants or hotels or anything but anyway we got the place open and the place had to refurbish. We had to start at the bottom. And we got it going after a lot of difficulties and all sorts of problems, you know, and I think I was there two years and then I was approached by the Jury Company. They were interested in opening the Moira Hotel at the time and then from then onwards we opened the Moira. Then I was asked would I take over the catering in the airport.
- 111.**MM:** Now the Moira, was the Moira only opening or had the Moira been opened? Did you open the Moira?
- 112.**JO:** Yeah and when I left I asked them to take my brother Willie and he took it over from me. Then I was approached about the job in the airport and at that time it was the airport and Aer Lingus and ...
- 113.**MM:** Who approached you can you remember?
- 114.**JO:** I do, it was Major General Hogan and he was the Assistant General Manager at the time.
- 115.**MM:** And would he have been a customer in the Moira or is that it?
- 116.**JO:** Yeah, I remember as clear, I can picture the night he approached, he... come up 'I want to talk to you', you know. So I went out to the airport and I took that over and I spent twenty-one years there. And it went from one thing to another in there you know.
- 117.**MM:** Now when you opened up first was the Collar of Gold Restaurant there or did you open it up?
- 118.**JO:** No I opened all that. I opened up the shops everything. There was nothing there.
- 119.**MM:** Had things just moved because when Aer Lingus started first it started in Baldonnell didn't it? And then they moved to the current site?
- 120.**JO:** Yeah. That's when I went and at that time Christ when you come to think of it the size of the place, and the size of it now. It was wonderful. I spent twenty-one very, very happy years there. Everything was, you knew everybody, everybody knew you, you knew all the staff. It was that size you know.
- 121.**MM:** And who had you, you came there as sort of manager, and you had say Jimmy Flahive is it?
- 122.**JO:** No, we took him after. There was nobody there at that time when I went you see. I'm trying to remember, there was only women and stuff like that. The staff catering and everything else was done from one spot. The whole place had to be reorganised. I mean new buildings came up and then you had kitchen set-up for staff catering of that size and you couldn't do, you had to, space was limited to a certain extent in the old building you know. It was only as things go bigger that we opened up kitchens separated from the, you know and all the, and we started that time the outdoor catering.
- 123.**MM:** Right.
- 124.**JO:** I mean we were catering for, we catered at that time for some of the biggest at that particular time. We catered for I remember one was for two thousand people in the RDS. And

Christ when I come to think, when we jotted down all the stuff we had to have, miles of bloody tablecloth, you know all that type of crack and we had to organised our own catering equipment.

125. But we were lucky in one sense because we had such huge quantities of equipment. We were able to use our own knives and forks and that was the whole idea in the back of my mind when we started the thing. We started the outdoor catering like where we'd sell stuff to the shops and that was from the by-products of all the stuff that we used to be putting on the aircraft. That's how that started. Yeah, then as things went on we had a succession of different chefs. Jimmy Flahive then became chef then. He was a very good man, and at that time when that started then we'd other places opening up. Like for instance, we had the catering with a couple of thousand staff. The planes, three, four, five thousand meals a day going out of it you know. And that was a different thing altogether. So there was a huge ah ...

126.MM: Was the restaurant always called the Collar of Gold?

127.JO: No it was called the Dublin Airport Restaurant first. And that's where we had all the dancing and started the wedding breakfast and all that type of thing.

128.MM: It became, it was sort of a magnet for all of North Dublin wasn't it?

129.JO: We were doing so much business that the hoteliers in Dublin tried to stop us and took us to court to stop us getting our license yeah.

130.MM: People used to go to the airport just for the novelty, to try and see the planes ...

131.JO: Oh sure, Jesus, we had I mean, we would be booked out, New Years Eve from the, say after New Years Eve it was booked out for the next (New Year's Eve). Saturday night dinner dances; that was the place to go. Very interesting when you come to think of it, that was the place to go.

132.MM: Was it at this stage then that you got married or was it at this stage ...

133.JO: I got married when I was manager of the, oh I'll never forget that, that was the time that the catering people were out in strike (1951). And my wedding breakfast was in Dun Laoghaire. The Royal Marine (Hotel) and interesting enough, you know, the union people got onto me and said we're very sorry but we can do nothing about it but you're going to have a rough time (laugh). Because that was one of the places where they were a bit tough! Militant ah yeah, Jesus, only the other day I was thinking about, my daughter was fifty years of age the other day and her birthday, the day she was born I remember we had a very big wedding breakfast down and I'd everything set-up and these people had to be sure that I was going to be there. Oh Jesus half eleven, I got a call from the house, you'd better come down here and I was driving into the nursing home and my hand out (inaudible) to tell them I had a pregnant woman inside yeah. And I only got back (to the airport) at the start wedding and about twenty minutes afterwards I got a call to say 'look you've a daughter'. My God I remember that.

134.MM: And you were out at the airport at that stage! The whole idea of this wedding breakfast, people had their weddings in the morning wasn't it?

135.JO: Oh yeah, and you see all the whole thing was we'd changing rooms, they'd change, going out in the air.

136.MM: That's right they were heading off in their honeymoon or whatever and that's why it was ideal?

137.JO: Absolutely fabulous.

138.MM: And how many would people have to a wedding at that stage.

- 139.**JO:** Oh you were talking about maybe a hundred and twenty. Oh that would be the maximum because we had to have space, what you call it, travellers and I mean they were number one. Oh Christ many of the time I was in hot water over that (Laugh). Of course the announcement would be coming over you know and you'd be trying to keep people quiet and somebody would want a big speech you know and you'd be accused doing something that wasn't in the interest of aviation you know (Laugh). But it was all fabulous.
- 140.**During that period then I became Chairman of the European Catering Committee and we used to meet twice a year. I was three years Chairman of that, every six months we met in different and you know when you come to think of it at that time like the, what would I say the, the word I'm looking for would be, the commercial concern there was between different companies trying to one outdo the other. And yet we, as it were, all the Catering Managers from all over Europe, used to meet every six months. We were a wonderful bunch of men, we used to discuss everything and pass on things that went well and this and that, you know, and there was never any, we always used to say 'you know the bloody politicians weren't caterers'. I often remember saying that. The wonderful camaraderie that was with these men and catering was unbelievable and in a time when it became very restricted at what one could do on the aircraft, how one was helping the other and in particular the Scandinavians when that happened. They got everything to economy; the only thing you could serve was sandwiches. And the Scandinavians at that time were tops in what they could do with the sandwich.**
- 141.**MM:** Yeah their *smorgasbord* and all that?
- 142.**JO:** They were absolute, and I mean there was no problem, they'd think to help you and give you ideas. Ah Jesus they were fabulous. Em and then I left there ...
- 143.**MM:** And you mentioned that you were also on a committee for Cathal Brugha Street as well?
- 144.**JO:** Oh I was yeah. I forget, there were eight of us. We used to meet every two months and it was discussing how it should be run and ...
- 145.**MM:** Really how to develop catering education as such?
- 146.**JO:** And a big problem at the time, I won't like to because I might hurt somebody. The big problem at the time was em ...
- 147.**MM:** There was more of a domestic slant on the training as opposed to a commercial?
- 148.**JO:** And we were trying to, which we subsequently did get it down, that we were able to get people that were in the job and set it up as a proper entity you know. Oh yeah we used to meet maybe ...
- 149.**MM:** It's interesting now because one of the first guys to go in like that, say Jimmy Kilbride, he'd spent time with you in the airport?
- 150.**JO:** That's right, Jimmy Kilbride and Jesus the other fellow...
- 151.**MM:** Mucky Dunne, is it, PJ Dunne.
- 152.**JO:** Dunne served his time with me in the Shelbourne Hotel and his brother-in-law, and I was telling you about the pastry cook in there, Fritz Waldemeyer married Paddy Dunne's sister.
- 153.**MM:** Wow.



- 154.**JO:** Paddy at the time was very fond of the beer, but he was years older than I was and I mean I wasn't into one bit booze or anything, but Paddy been in and he was working with Fritz and he was a great bloody character. He came for Mountmellick (County Laois). Yeah, but a bloody character.
- 155.**MM:** So he was in the Shelbourne before going to Jammet's?
- 156.**JO:** Oh yeah (inaudible).
- 157.**MM:** In the Shelbourne. Just thinking now actually about sort of restaurants at that time, now you had Jammet's, you had the Red Bank, were there any other, you had the Regal Rooms maybe.
- 158.**JO:** No Regal Rooms was practically gone. You had the Gresham, you had the Royal Hibernian. Now the big one at that time was The Russell. You had the Shelbourne, I mean the Shelbourne at that time now.
- 159.**MM:** Like when you started there it was very good?
- 160.**JO:** It was, oh yeah, but it had gone down then, and you had the Gresham. Like the ones we'd go to. I would spend I'm sure three or four nights a week in Jammet's. I could afford to spend three or four nights a week in Jammet's and have change out of maybe five or six pounds. That would give you some idea.
- 161.**MM:** The money you were on?
- 162.**JO:** And that was at the back bar. There's a back bar in Jammet's. Things weren't expensive at the time.
- 163.**MM:** But the front, the main room was expensive yeah?
- 164.**JO:** It was expensive, but nothing like the expensive nowadays. The Hibernian the standard of the bar service there was fabulous. Again the catering in the Hibernian was beautiful. I think the first, you might say, the first taste we had in Ireland here of food to a very high standard with very small portions was the Russell.
- 165.**MM:** And that was under Pierre Rolland.
- 166.**JO:** And Pierre Rolland, his father taught me when I was in Norbury House in England, the first job I went to outside of Ireland.
- 167.**MM:** Pierre Rolland's father? (**note:** This is unlikely according to Pierre's daughter)
- 168.**JO:** And by Jesus he was some chef I'd tell you. We used to sit at the table and you sat down at that table according to your station of life and he'd sit at the top there flanked by all his men at they were and we the little fellows down the end and we sat down at the one time, there was no tittering and got special, the what's his name cooked. The *entremetier*, he was the one that made the staff food and everybody else ate from the same plate but that was it. But he was the chef and then like the manager, the management changed and this famous French manager came to the hotel and like everything else when he came after a certain time he brought his own people. And at that time came this famous Eugene Kauffler who subsequently became the Head Chef in the Dorchester. He was a Swiss, fabulous man and these were all the people he was under at that time. Ah yeah.
- 169.**MM:** How was the Red Bank?

- 170.JO: Red Bank the restaurant, there was a French chef there and his food when I used to go to it like for instance, when I was much younger I went to a couple of weddings there and it was a great place for a wedding. The food there was very good because at that time management had all changed and the chef there was a French chef (Jean Retty). I used to go there a lot because Hardy's the fish people had an interest that, in the Red Bank and I used to pal around with Paddy Hardy and we used to go there a lot. Between it and the back bar in Jammet's and then at times I used to maybe of a Saturday night to the Hibernian or the Gresham. Both places the food was excellent. The other place, where did I say it was? The Russell, you only went there when you were brought there. Now there were small restaurants.
- 171.MM: Do you remember the *Café Belge*?
- 172.JO: The *Café Belge* that was in Dame Street. The *Café Belge* was again was more of lunch trade than anything else yeah. And that was run by Geldof, yeah. God she became a famous bridge player and he was Belgian and he subsequently opened when they closed *Café Belge* he opened a delicatessen.
- 173.MM: He had the *patisserie* I think on Leinster Street.
- 174.JO: Maybe he had. But he had what you call it ...Where's the Independent? Middle Abbey Street. You went up steps I remember it because we used to go there with my father.
- 175.MM: There was a place there called the Plaza? That was where the Adelphi Cinema was. And Geldof, he was General Manager or something of that when it opened. That was 1928.
- 176.JO: Ah the Plaza. Oh, I danced there yeah, oh yeah the Plaza. Oh that was a beautiful place when that opened. I forget what the hell happened there. See money at that time don't forget ...
- 177.MM: See the Wall Street Crashed happened in 1929 I suppose.
- 178.JO: When you come to think of it on one had the money that's going round nowadays and I often think, I say to myself how the hell did my parents, we always had a good home, we were never short of anything that I can remember. We were all sent to good schools.
- 179.MM: How many of you were in the family?
- 180.JO: Six of us, three boys and three girls. Two went to catering, Willie and myself and Karl he was an accountant. Both dead. Three sisters all married. One of them was a Hickey, she managed Hickey Fabrics. Another one is in England and she's over ninety and another one is in Canada. All married, all good cooks (laugh). Extraordinary cooks.
- 181.MM: There were other places that came later on, there was the Tandoori Rooms, they came later on?
- 182.JO: Now that was Butt. One other place to go to at that time, because Mike Butt was a bloody character, and he ran a good restaurant and he had very good Indian food. When you talk about those type of restaurants, Jesus I can't remember his name, near The Royal, Jesus I nearly had his name there, he was an Italian – Ostinelli, and Ostinelli was a typical Italian and he never lost it. He (inaudible) with his hands you know and Ostinelli thought he had the greatest restaurant in the world. The food he served was great if you wanted just pasta and that was really the beginning of a lot of these restaurants.
- 183.MM: So he was sort of maybe the first pasta house in Dublin?
- 184.JO: Yeah now the one before that now, there was a one in ...Lincoln Place, Bernardo's, It was a great place to go to. Anyway wait till I tell you, there was another one in Mary Street, an

- Italian one as well. Just below the fruit market, on that line there. I tell you that place used be jammed of a weekend so you want and try find out the name. I forget it now. (Alfredo's)
- 185.**JO:** The Green Roosters when you said the Broadway (Soda Fountain). The Green Rooster used to be a marvellous place... O'Connell Street. Ah Jesus I can tell you I was a young fellow. I remember we used to go there, why because the owner of the place had two of most beautiful looking daughters you saw in your life (laugh).
- 186.**MM:** And was he Irish or was he foreign?
- 187.**JO:** No he was Irish yeah. I forget his name, anyway now you've opened up, you just mentioned another one way.
- 188.**MM:** Sorry I mentioned the Broadway Soda Fountain?
- 189.**JO:** The Broadway Soda Fountain was just a soda fountain. There was a place in Cathedral Street famous for its Steaks. The Palace, but the steaks were absolutely fabulous. The same as the Dolphin (Hotel).
- 190.**MM:** My next door neighbour at home and her sister, God bless her, both of them are dead now, but they were waitresses in the Palace. Ann Mackey and Lilly Ryan. And I believe you used to pick out your steak?
- 191.**JO:** Oh yeah, and the steaks. There was no such a thing as top sirloin steak and that you know it was striploin. They were what you'd call a point steak, rump steaks and t-bones and you could eat them with your bloody fork. Then they had the Dolphin, and the Dolphin was one the places to go to one time. All horse people used to be there and Jesus they didn't, if they weren't interested in horses, they were interested in what you call it, greyhounds. And I remember there many is the time I went there with my wife and there'd be nothing for you ... I tell now the style of the place. It was nothing for a waitress to sit down beside you and take your order and say 'how're things going' (laugh). And they used to have the open grill and the open grill, again, oh my God, the steaks they had there and the chops as they would call it, fancy names and ...
- 192.**MM:** They had a thing there called hare soup. What was that like?
- 193.**JO:** That's right yeah. The stuff was actually, I never forget my life when I saw the insides of that kitchen. Like the Metropole kitchen too at one time, it was famous, but I can tell you could have sown button potatoes in it!
- 194.**MM:** There was so much dirt in the ground yeah.
- 195.**JO:** Jesus, the chef in it at the time was a French man, a very old man and in fact when I opened the International in Bray, I took him on there but at that time he'd gone from bad to worse. And, ah they were famous for their monkey gland steaks and all this type of thing. Their steaks were great. Very,... fabulous drinking place and like the fellows in the bar in here at that time, sometimes used to be keeping these horsy folks in money. They might be broke for a bloody week or two weeks, you know. Then all of a sudden they'd be full of money and they'd come in and while a fellow might give them a £100, which was a lot of money of that time. Jesus they'd get £150 back ... You know, that's the way things were.
- 196.**MM:** So the waiters and all were acting nearly as loan sharks?
- 197.**JO:** Ah sure Jesus, go on, that was famous too. Ah ...
- 198.**MM:** You had one level of restaurant which was the Jammet's, the Russell, the big hotels. Then you had under that then you had the likes of the Green Rooster ...

- 199.**JO:** You had the Green Rooster, you had the Metropole, you had the Savoy. You had the Palace, Clery's. Yeah, I mean you didn't have these restaurants outside the city you know, people didn't have the money. Oh, there's another place now that was great. The Wicklow Hotel, that used to be a good watering place.
- 200.**MM:** And the Metropole and all they would have, again people would have gone there, they might have been going to a show or something like that. They'd go there for their high tea. There was sort of omelettes and all that sort of stuff.
- 201.**JO:** Of course. Correct and on top of that don't forget to say they used to have the big ballroom there. I mean some of the biggest dances in the city were held there. Christ you got dressed up, oh Jesus. My God, when I come to think of it the standard of novelties, I'm talking about hats and all this type of thing that they used to have at that time. You wouldn't buy them for €5 or €6 a piece now. They were all hand outs. But of course the Gresham too was a good place at the time. You had the two, you had the restaurant and you had the grill room. Ah, Shelbourne was never a place in the latter years that one would ever ... When they opened the Saddle Room now that was different, then it became a ...
- 202.**MM:** They opened up a grill room isn't it?
- 203.**JO:** It was called the Saddle Room, on the side, and they had a separate entrance to it. And that started off that, then they had the restaurant, I remember there going a couple of times to the restaurant. It left a lot to be desired.
- 204.**MM:** Now at that stage was Maurice O'Looney, head chef at that stage?
- 205.**JO:** Ah I forget, I think he could have been yeah. But it could have been of a better standard because the equipment they had in their office Jesus unbelievable.
- 206.**MM:** Yeah they'd great equipment because I remember Jimmy Kilbride said when he was there for a while, Eoin Dillon had brought him there. And when he left the airport, he says like the standard was very poor (in the Shelbourne). He was brought in to try and bring up the standards.
- 207.**JO:** Jimmy was a great character, a great character. And I can tell you he was one fabulous bloody worker. You could rely on Jimmy a hundred percent. And if you couldn't rely on Jimmy, be Jesus, he'd be kicking the ass of somebody to make sure that everything come up all right. You could put your trust in him. He was a fabulous man. He started off, he had different businesses and that and I was always thrilled when I heard he was doing well because he was good lad. (**note:** Jimmy Kilbride became a very successful entrepreneur)
- 208.**MM:** Yeah. But he, I heard at one stage the Collar of Gold won the best airport restaurant in the world? When was that?
- 209.**JO:** That's right. I forget now when it was but it wasn't called the Collar of Gold at that time. It was still the Dublin Airport Restaurant. Yeah. It would have been around about, I went there in 1949, '59 somewhere '60 odd I think. I used to do very well there. God, we had some magnificent big banquets there. Very high standard.
- 210.**MM:** That's right, ice carvings and all that sort of thing?
- 211.**JO:** Billy Ryan was very good at that. Oh, he was very good. A very quiet young man, yeah, a very quiet young man but he was artistic, artistically he had a wonderful pair of hands. A wonderful pair of hands.
- 212.**MM:** Do you remember Peter Powrie?



- 213.**JO:** Peter Powrie was in the Soup Bowl. A very good place to go to. Another good place. It had atmosphere, you were sitting on top of each other. Everybody knew each other and then the place next door.
- 214.**MM:** When did you open up your own place Johnny's or was that after the Kiltiernan thing like or what came first?
- 215.**JO:** Kiltiernan came first.
- 216.**MM:** Okay and how did that come about? You were at the airport, did you finish the airport?
- 217.**JO:** I was at the airport and my brother came to me one day and said to me, you know, 'there's a place well worth looking at', and I knew the people that owned it at the time. They were famous builders and that. And one of the brothers used to live a couple of doors away from me, so I went, I met Matt one day and I asked him about this place and he said to me 'you should talk to them, I don't think they're interested in developing it you know'. So I went and had a look at it and I thought to myself, and the site was beautiful, beautiful. But there was another place at that time near Grafton Street, The Wicklow Hotel, and we were very interested in buying that, the brother (Willie) and myself, and I went to the banks and they would have, but unfortunately somebody else got in ahead and whatever. You know how these things happen and it was from that that we got interested in Kiltiernan. Ah, Kiltiernan would have been a great success but for the fact, that place was already booked out completely for six months until all the bombs start going in ...
- 218.**MM:** The Dublin bombings, the Monaghan bombings, the North, the whole lot.
- 219.**JO:** And that place we hadn't a booking left over night. Everything was cancelled.
- 220.**MM:** Tell me how it began though?
- 221.**JO:** First of all, we had to get people interested in it which we duly did. Our own money plus my brother-in-law plus some Americans I knew and some Irish investors, and we put the thing together.
- 222.**MM:** Now was a there a building there or were you building from scratch?
- 223.**JO:** Oh no, we had a site plus we'd a convent and a church. The church and the rooms next to the church had to be knocked. The main building, that was left standing, we had to rebuild the whole catering block and all that. That was all built. We got into various problems. Costs went out of the roof. Where we were told the sewage system was ample, we had to build a whole new bloody system, which cost a fortune. And various things went against us in the matter of the ground. The ground was full of different springs. We had a hell of a job putting down foundations, and at that time the time the idea of a club and spending x amount of money, which we were getting, and what the people weren't anxious about was, that they wanted the club and the hotel and the restaurant to be exclusive to them. And there wasn't a hope in hell of anything happenings there with the thing and we found it very hard to get members. I think in the end we got about maybe a hundred, if that.
- 224.**But the facilities were there. All the golf was there, the swimming pool was there, the exercise rooms, all the equipment was there, that wasn't enough. And like when you come to think we were asking that time £300. Jesus you'd be lucky now for £300 a week. Anyway, it went bankrupt. It was before it's time.**
- 225.**MM:** You had Cassius Clay there at one stage?

226.**JO:** Oh God, we had Cassius Clay, the names we had there we had Paul Newman and people like that. I used to breakfast nearly every morning with Paul Newman. You know he'd be up at 6 a.m., he'd go into the sauna room and he'd have to have specially, all the fruit juice had to be done, just a second before he'd come up. A lovely, lovely man. We'd all those people.



**Figure JO.3: Willie Opperman (left), Johnny (centre) outside of their Country Club in Kiltiernan**

227.**MM:** Because they were all involved in Ardmore Studios at the time?

228.**JO:** We had famous, what's the famous ... Sean Connery, yeah and God there was many other fellows. The rooms were beautiful. They were all fully equipped with everything, a bar, everything you could ask for. Yeah, but like everything else it was before its time and the time it happened wasn't conducive. Anyway ...

229.**MM:** Sure everything, so much closed at that time. The Russell shut down at that time?

230.**JO:** Everything, anyway after that I got a call one morning from Rome and it was from a man, a big caterer in Rome that used to do our catering in the airport, of the airline and he asked me was I interested, he said to me 'I heard you're now free at the moment', you know. How the hell? ... He said to me 'would I be interested in taking a job down in England'. So I said well I'll go and have a look at it. So it was taking over all the catering at London airport, Heathrow, and they had the contract. And there was only the one place at the time. And they had a catering there and they had another division somewhere else down a bit. Anyway I went to see them and your man told

me that they were very disinterested in the present caterers and would I take over the job. So I said well I'd have to have a look at the terms and all. And I told them at the time I'd have to take my family here, and yet, there was no problem in that. Anyway I was going through the, back to the airport that day behind the scenes and I met a fellow I knew very well, from when I was chairman of the Catering Committee and he was in I think it was TWA. So I said 'where, what are you doing here?' I told him and 'Jesus' he said 'be very careful, they're doing our catering, we're going to get rid of them.' So I thought now I'd better be very careful here. I thought to myself, now if I took over this job after the place going wallop and it wouldn't look too well on the CV you know.

231.I was offered a very handsome...Package you know. So I came over and I discussed it with Eileen and she said 'I can't' but I said 'maybe I'd be very careful', you know, so I thought about it. And I waited for the fellow to call me and then told him I wasn't interested. Something else had come up in the meantime, you know. So he said 'I'll call you again in the afternoon' which he duly then but I said to him 'no'. In the meantime just to show you what happened, they did loose the contract. Now of course I would have been blamed for that! But in the meantime a friend of ours who was in the auctioneering business used to be in the catering, Joe Lucy. I'm sure you've heard of him.

232.MM: I've heard of Joe Lucy alright yeah.

233.JO: He called me and told me well there was a place in Malahide that you might be interested cause if you put a little thought in, and that's how I got involved in 'Johnny's' (in 1974). I had a look at it and thought what I could do with it and then I knew if I gutted that place.

234.MM: Was there a restaurant in it before?

235.JO: No. It was a house. It was a fine house, beautiful rooms. It was the basement that I gutted out. I purchased that whole house for £11,000 at that time, and em, I got clearance from the bank to buy it, you know, and a friend of mine at the same time helped me with it, you see, as an investor and em, I spent that morning that we opened in the County Council office here in Dublin where they had sent me a telegram, and I got it, to say that if I opened that day, that for everyday opened they'd fine me a £100 until I got permission. I had permission but I had to go in and spent the morning there.

236.Anyway I came back home around midday, 1 pm had to get stuck in then to get everything. Every single thing that could every bloody go wrong, you know, went wrong that day. I'm not telling you one word of a lie. Firstly the day, had pissed from the heavens, all the people that I had booked, Haughey, the O'Connors, the whole lot of them, they were at the races that day and the races were cancelled and they'd been out there, and of course they came back all jarred every bloody one of them. I remember the fellow who was looking after the parking of the cars, and we had objections by the way also from neighbours. We overcame that, but that day, Christ I'll never forget it. I didn't think I'd ever see another bloody customer. First we were cooking everything to order, pheasants, the bloody lot!! Everybody came in at the one time, everybody came in half jarred. Everybody was looking for service. Christ it was chaotic. At 5am I was still, myself and the wife washing up, and tears running down our eyes, thinking that's you know, that's the end now.

237.We opened up on the Monday, Sunday we spent all day in bed and at the same time we got up to prepare for the Monday. Didn't think we'd get much but we didn't do too bad on the Monday, but we never looked back after that! Until one day a good customer of ours, a solicitor who said to me I don't what the hell you're opening of a Monday night. He says 'you need a day off, you'll kill yourselves', because he said 'you won't loose bloody one customer'. 'You should close on a Monday and have a good weekend off.' And I thought and I said to the wife, what we did, we just called the staff together and said 'as and from tonight we'll close on a Monday'. We never had a problem after that. It was marvellous.

- 238.MM: And were you opened on the Sunday?
- 239.JO: Oh no. Sure we were working to what, 4 am to 5 am on a Saturday.
- 240.And that's it up to today.
- 241.MM: But you left, you were in Johnny's, did you not go working for Bord Failte at some stage?
- 242.MM: No. I thought you'd gone work for Bord Fáilte?
- 243.JO: Not that was Willie.
- 244.MM: So basically when you finished in Johnny's you sold it to Patsy McGuirk is it?
- 245.JO: I didn't sell it to Patsy McGuirk no. I sold it to a conglomerate (in 1989) right and they sold it afterwards to Patsy McGuirk but the people that bought from me weren't going to open it up as a restaurant. They were going to put in a whole system of computers and that type of thing. Patsy is still there and he's doing very well indeed.
- 246.MM: Was there much in Malahide at the time food wise?
- 247.JO: No, no. The Grand was very poor at that stage. We were the only restaurant opened in Malahide at that time.
- 248.MM: There must be around forty of them now?
- 249.JO: Oh the King Sitric, ourselves were the two restaurants, Aidan McManus.
- 250.MM: Probably in the '70s was when the like of the King Sitric, the Mirabeau, the Guinea Pig, Rolland, Pierre Rolland's son Henri in Kiliney. These were a new wave of sort of chef proprietor...
- 251.JO: Correct yeah. Killiney that's right.
- 252.MM: What else opened up, em (pause). I suppose the Mirabeau was very famous for its showmanship or such?
- 253.JO: Showmanship. God he was a gas man. He really was. But you know you're man, when you come to think of it, he had a Rolls Royce at that time. And he used to be at the football matches and all and in the back of the Rolls Royce, would be every bloody thing you could think of, you know. Wines and everything else and it was really a pity when you think, the people who we used to listen to, the journalists and everything, the way they used to talk about the man behind his back, you know.
- 254.MM: Yeah, talking about that, what's his name who was out with you at the airport? He became the first TV chef, Jimmy Flahive.
- 255.JO: Jimmy Flahive, yeah.
- 256.MM: When did the media suddenly start getting interested in food and you know and food writers started writing about food and things like that?
- 257.JO: Well the first one that really came to attention was Lucy Burke. Helen Lucy Burke. She, you know, they can say what they like about the woman. She really forced standards you know. Now there was very few, the odd time...



- 258.**MM:** I suppose people like Theodora Fitzgibbon had been around.
- 259.**JO:** No, what Theodora Fitzgibbon yeah but she wouldn't have, she didn't have the same punches as Lucy Burke. Lucy Burke was writing and she was causing such mayhem that people began to take notice, (Pause) and then there was the Terry O'Sullivan (Nuala O'Faolain's father), his Saturday column used to be marvellous. He'd have some restaurant in it, you know. And that's how all that started you know. His column was in The Evening Herald. And, ah (pause) that's about it. I'm just trying to think now, but really of any standard, it was Lucy Burke's who started that. She was the one that really led. A lot followed you know.
- 260.**MM:** I'm just thinking the other fellow who opened up around the same time in the '70s was John Howard. He opened up the *Coq Hardi*.
- 261.**JO:** Now John Howard was a famous chef. I mean a good one. And his food was excellent.
- 262.**MM:** Did he train under your brother or he started off I think in Jury's? He was in Jury's in Dame Street I think at one stage?
- 263.**JO:** Well he probably was but I don't know whether he was under Willie or not ah, I forget now to be frank with you. But he couldn't have been at that thing because the brother brought in em, (pause) Willy Widmer. Willy Widmer that came from Switzerland. And he put standards on me, he was the one that put the standards on Jury's at that time and he subsequently opened the, em, (pause) the Boyne Valley Hotel. And did a wonderful job there and has since retired, and now he's the one that opened up this gourmet (company) for making pates and all that type of thing. And he supplies all the good restaurants and everything else in it.
- 264.**He** really brought the standards into Jury's yeah. He was an outstanding, an international chef, he was. A young man, fabulous.
- 265.**MM:** Do you remember a fellow called Armar Hoffman?
- 266.**JO:** I do, he was a German. He went down to Kildare or Tipperary somewhere.
- 267.**MM:** Right he was in the Central (Hotel) but I think he was in Jammet's, then I think in the Central.
- 268.**JO:** In the Central Hotel at that time was the father's assistant chef in the Central. Tall fellow, again a fabulous bloody worker. But you know at that time, he died, I think he's dead, his name escapes me at the moment but he was in the Central. I forget now his name. He was a lovely fellow.
- 269.**MM:** But that would make sense because that Mrs. Mullins. When she left the Gresham she went to the Central so she would have probably brought him with her. (**note:** Miss Mullins was the manageress of the Gresham until Toddy O'Sullivan took over)
- 270.**On** the subject, Miss Mullins being the famous sort of woman of the catering industry, she was totally dedicated, were there many women working within the industry? Was it mostly men in the kitchens except for maybe the vegetable section is it?
- 271.**JO:** A lot of women serving, waitresses, and no there wasn't that, washers of course were always women. Well there was always a few (cooks) but never women chefs but that's now started since the colleges...and they're turning out some very good ones.
- 272.**But** the standards we have nowadays here, are comparable to anything else in any of the big cities, very, very good. As I say the only thing is, and we're turning out some bloody good cooks. Very

good cooks, the basic, you'd never think. I remember in our time Jesus even to mention somebody going into, frankly I think the easiest way to explain it, (pause) if a family got in touch with you, they'd say to you look I have a son or a daughter who were useless as anything academics or anything would you be able to give them a job in catering. That wouldn't happen anywhere nowadays. I mean you have very high standards of education and everything else now. You know, the whole thing has changed but I can tell you I remember when they'd call you up and say, you know, could you place him or her. Things have changed, that's changed, the original idea of the hotel school and that, also the school in Shannon, and a different outlook altogether. People got interest in their own businesses and that, and as I say one of the great movers of the time was this fellow Micky Mullins.

273.**MM:** Now you were saying that Micky Mullins, yourself, Ken Besson. Who else would have been involved in that sort of movement to try and improve college catering education? Ken Besson was the Hibernian wasn't he?

274.**JO:** That's right. Ken was Irish. His father was Swiss. I'm just trying to think who else was there at the time.

275.**MM:** What about Hector Fabron, was he, or did he come later?

276.**JO:** No Hector was there, but Hector - academic wise Hector wouldn't have been interested but not in pushing things the way we would like to, do you understand what I mean. Em (pause) Hector wouldn't have a, he wouldn't have the (same) outlook that like we would have had.

277.**MM:** And would people like Michael Marley were they involved at all.

278.**JO:** Michael Marley, yeah another man yeah. Yeah I forgot about Michael, another man who was interested always in that particular period as well. He was (involved in the Panel of Chefs and worked in the Metropole) yeah. I've forgotten a lot of these sort of fellows you know?

279.**MM:** When is the first time you ate out yourself?

280.**JO:** When was the first time? Let me put it this way I was born in a family where there was always interest in food and like I knew a lot about food before, you know, many of the young people of that time would have had the opportunity because we had it at home. We had wine with our meal and all this type of thing, you know. Not everyday but particularly at the weekend and that and em, we were offered wine, and if you wanted to take it you took and you didn't if you didn't. There was no thing about it. When was the first time I ever went out for a meal? Jesus that's a hard one! (Laugh). The first time I ever went out for a meal I would think was the first time I went on holiday to Wales. Oh well of course now as a small child we visited Switzerland when I was four or five years of age, and when I went to Switzerland and I mean it took three days to get there. I went with my sister and stayed with my father naturally at home. Em, and like you couldn't afford but twice I went, at four and I went again at about eight years of age to Switzerland and interesting enough one of the personal tragedies I felt in my life was, being in Aer Lingus and could travel as often as I want to, and take my parents with me to Switzerland. And my father that time was dead I always think that was a tragedy, mind you he was more Irish than the Irish themselves but still he was Swiss, you know.

281.**MM:** Technological changes that you would have seen over the years, you would have seen a huge change from coal ranges to stoves, and then refrigeration?

282.**JO:** Unbelievable. Coal ranges. The Gresham or the Shelbourne a huge range there was there. What it would be ten, twelve, fourteen feet. They were all coal. They were fired up everyday and the head kitchen porter had to make sure the doors were stoked and the bloody heat of those things. Fabulous ranges, there weren't nothing buckled in those I can tell you. Machinery we had, you're making the ice cream; you made it by the hand. Em, but refrigeration wasn't a big thing

because in the Shelbourne at that time when I started big blocks of ice used to come in every day and in the *poissonry*, what we'd call the fish department there was an all enclosed in glass, sliding glass doors and inside that was all tiled, white tiles with a drain off in them and that's where all the fish was, on top of fresh ice. There was a fridge there, but that was only meat was in it. And that was all, a big thing of...

283.MM: Was that fridge, was that an electrical fridge?

284.JO: Yeah it was run by a big motor and it was outside. And the bloody belt on it you know and ah also in the butchery all that, there was blocks of ice in the...In behind again, an area where there was all tiled. Of course everything in it filled the Shelbourne, from top to bottom was tiled. And God of a weekend you had to make, there was no fresh bread in there for the weekend and you had to make your own French bread rolls and this was a bloody big thing of dough and that you had to knead that dough and belt it yourself you know. I was an amazing young fellow at that time, I wouldn't have that amount of strength to do it but it was done. Moulded up and the French bread was baked in the oven. It's all marvellous that kind of thing.

285.MM: Now were they electrical ovens?

286.JO: All electrical ovens. No electrical yeah, or were they, Jesus now you have you. And I think they were gas and all the pastries and everything was made at that time and you had another place, a big box and ah glass fronted you know and underneath was all lined and you had your *Pièce Monter* there. The baskets made with sugar and all that in dry air so that there was nothing.

287.MM: The lime was to absorb the moisture, yeah. You mentioned fish there, how about the whole idea of you know, this whole black fasting and things like that you know, the fish on Friday and that sort of stuff.

288.JO: Friday's (pause) only one thing I remember about really Friday. If you were on guard of a Friday there was a set fish used to come in and it was always in the afternoon and you'd have a bloody big steak and the steak was to be made that it looked like a piece of, what you call it, of piece of grilled turbot (pause). Fish God when you come to think of it Jesus you'd commit bloody murder rather than eat a bit (laugh) of meat on a Friday. (Laugh) when you'd come to think of it, God almighty. The changes (pause).

289.MM: Do you think that affected peoples attitude towards fish?

290.JO: I do because ah I think a case and point if you just think about it (pause). I'm absolutely amazed and I can't believe it at times how easily people took to no bags, no plastic bags. They're doing exactly the same now with smoking. If our religion at the time was less a thing about eating meat on a Friday there would be nothing about it. They'd probably eat more bloody fish than they would eat meat. But you were forbidden and that was it.

291.MM: What I'm saying is did people not eat fish on other days of the week because they considered it to be...

292.JO: That's right yeah, Penance food. Now they can't eat it because it's gone too expensive!

293.MM: What would you consider you'd be most proud of looking back over your time?

294.JO: My God (pause) well I suppose really I'd have to say the happiest years of my life were in the airport because I was in where it was new, it was growth and ah it was exciting. Really exciting. The people that you knew were fabulous people. They were all dedicated to this new concept and everybody I met in the airline business in most countries were exactly the same. Ah it was an exciting history, part of history. Yeah (pause). Running your own business, opening your first business although it was doomed to failure really due to lack of funds was again a very happy

period. But nothing compares to the thrill there was at that time. Meeting other nationalities and how they looked upon life. It was marvellous yeah.

295.MM: Were you to do everything again would you do anything different?

296.JO: No I'd do it exactly the same (laugh), both the bad and the good. One learns from the other yeah. Extraordinary.

297.MM: Isn't that great (laugh). Do you think there's any one particular period or one time when things really changed you know, sort of, I have this vision, you know, correct me I'm wrong. I have this vision that sort of at one stage eating out was for the rich. And that now eating out is for everyone.

298.JO: That's right, the war, number one and the (pause) what shall I say? The involvement, number one, of the airline business. If you really look into it, it really was the beginning, or the opening up of one's eyes or one's vision. It helped to open up the visions to of people here in Ireland and people began, things began to happen. There were jobs and factories and everything. That's the period which seemed to be slowly but surely devolving. And involvement in a brighter life, seemed to come out, and slowly but surely as things got better. You could see that people were having standards of living. Better standards, they were going out the odd time. The Irishman himself changed. That's the feeling I got. The feeling I got was, he wasn't the man that wanted to go out on his own with the lads. That stopped. They began to wheel out the pram. He began to go and take his wife out at night time. He began to take interest that the wife was a little more than just staying in the house and taking her out and have nice clothes. All that type of thing, you could see that change happening, all for the better. Like for instance, people like Dunnes, their stores opened up. You could see, many is the time I said, you could see families becoming better dressed. Things were happening you know.

299.MM: Yeah, yeah. Do you think PV Doyle would have had any role in it?

300.JO: Another man that I think had great visions, and he had the money to bring them about. You know, apart from building places, he had the concept that to build them, he had to fill them and ah, that needed marketing and that started. Managers at that time, later on he began to send them out. Go to different meetings and that and sell your product. All this was evolving at the time you know.

301.MM: I suppose we were coming more sort of confident.

302.JO: Confident is the word yeah. Confident as a nation yeah and little things that were happening really gave, now again you take an outfit like Aer Lingus at that time, I mean that was the pride of the nation and people began to you know sit back a bit, Jesus we can do this and you know. But this is true, that's what was happening. Factories were doing well. We were turning out products. I remember a time that, for instance, Newbridge cutlery and that, holy Jesus for anybody, Christ do you see the stuff they do nowadays. I'm only too happy to bring people down to see it. It's marvellous. That's all happening, that's all... Businesses began to get interested in people. Em, and I think too, no matter what people might say, unions at the time were very important. They helped to see that people could see the ends of their work. Their labour, what they were doing because they were getting ah, they were getting compensated for their hard work and that all, everybody has that input and it was all coming together at the one time.

303.MM: Yeah, it's amazing.

304.JO: What time is it? Jesus Christ 2.15 pm. I'll make a sandwich or something (turned tape off).

**Discussion while tape was turned off about professional chefs coming to Ireland from the continent and being classified as domestics**

- 305.MM: The whole thing there they had professional status on the continent and they came to Ireland and they were considered domestics.
- 306.JO: Now you see, there is a part of your thing that should be brought out you know. (Pause – making tea).
- 307.MM: Did your father speak French at home?
- 308.JO: A little but not really, you know. You know, when you come to think of it, that man's life, he would leave maybe 8am, get in, do all the orders you know and that type of thing. He'd be working then up to maybe 2 pm or 3 pm. Get the tram home, and he'd get home and he'd be back into work at 5.30 pm.
- 309.MM: Yeah he'd be home for an hour at most.
- 310.JO: Yeah and you'd be doing that not five days of the week but six days of the week or 5½ days maybe and every second Sunday you'd get off but you'd be working every other and what bloody chances did they have at that time of learning and teaching. You know when you come to it.
- 311.MM: When you come to think of it, it was all on the mother's shoulders wasn't it. And would you have picked up an awful lot French then in the kitchen in the Shelbourne?
- 312.JO: Yeah and the genes are there. They thought me an extra language at school, German and Latin...
- 313.MM: Was it the Jesuits in Newbridge College?
- 314.JO: Dominicans. I was never a great academic anyway. Then when I wanted to become more academic, I had no bloody time (laugh). (Pause).

**Discussion on what brought the Swiss to Ireland**

- 315.MM: Your brother Willie where did he do his apprenticeship? Was he younger than you?
- 316.JO: Oh yeah much younger. The two youngest in the family were the first two to die, yeah. Willie started in I think it was the Dolphin (pause). God I'm not too sure. I think it was the Dolphin. Em, Willie was never serious at first. Willie wanted to be an actor. And he was more or less at the Acting School in the Abbey (pause) and then I think they told him one day, that's about all he'd ever be. So (pause) I think it was in the (pause), I think it was in the Dolphin.
- 317.MM: But he went on then later on to have a share in the Dolphin did he or did he own it?
- 318.JO: He owned it with (Eamon) Andrews, yeah, but they made an utter mess of it. Eamon Andrews at the time was interested in dance halls and stuff like that. They thought they were going to set-up this thing, oh it was dreadful. (note: they turned it into a German Beer Cellar and disco) All they had to do was to clean the place up. Don't even (inaudible) just clean the floors and that. They'd a ready business, my God pouring in there. What did they do they set up this bloody thing, Christ it was dreadful, dreadful. Well, it just didn't go that was it. Ranch style!!! It was bloody dreadful now. Em I remember the first night I went out, Jesus they were gone mad.
- 319.MM: Where was he before that though?



- 320.**JO:** Willie, when I left the International in Bray I'd ask (Inaudible) to take him on. I took over the Moira, when I left the Moira Hotel I got the Kidneys at that time, for them to take on Willie and then Willie when they started to rebuild and to redo Jury's, Willie had the vision and the know how, and he was the one that started and put Jury's into what it was.
- 321.**MM:** So this is where the Intercontinental is now or where the, no Dame Street yeah, so brought then Willie Widmer and the whole lot in.
- 322.**JO:** Correct but years afterwards when they bought the Intercontinental they wanted Willie then to be the Marketing Director. And he felt that was a lower job, head strong. I suppose he was right but anyway. He went from better to better you know and ah (pause) he did all sort of things then. He went into antiques and made a fortune from them, you know. So but always had the interest in the business you know. Extraordinarily.
- 323.**MM:** It's in the blood (laugh).
- 324.**JO:** In course it is, it's in the genes. Genes are a remarkable thing. And some of them were politicians as well you know. Like Haughey, and Donagh O'Malley, I'm thinking of John Hanlon, ah, (pause) like it was characters that you go into a place, they were like singing and holding court, but there were such characters, story tellers. Jesus you never hear of those nowadays. All they want to do is go into a bar and just get jarred. (Laugh)
- 325.**Years ago, you'd go into Jammet's and all the different airline managers would be around. They were all characters but all business blokes you know. One famous fellow, I can't remember his name, and he had his birthday the same day as myself. We used to call each other the twins. He was the greatest story teller of all times, and you could just listen to him telling a story, the same story three time over in one night, but it would be different every time he'd tell it. And when he'd get to the end, he'd turn half snigger because he knew the end of it. Characters, Christ, I've seen a fellow and he could be sliding down the bar, but if he told you he was going to do something in the morning, it was done. You know they were that type, they were fantastic characters.**
- 326.**MM:** Oh I better hit the high road.
- 327.**JO:** I started a little wee shop at the departure gate and we used to sell bacon, sausages, all Haffner's stuff and even Jews used to call me and they'd take the bacon and sausages, I'd wrap it up for them but keep it quiet. And that was all. That started as a small. That grew very big. You know that was during the war years when you couldn't get a decent sausage or rasher or bacon in England. It was extraordinary.
- 328.**MM:** Whereas now you have all the different, everyone's in there now the Hanlon's and all the whole lot. Smoked salmon and the best of cheeses and this sort of stuff.

**329.End of Interview**